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ABSTRACT

To explore men's attitudes about teaching young children, this study surveyed 10 male and 8 female nursery school, kindergarten, and first-grade teachers with similar teaching experience. Participants were interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes on three general topics: (1) teaching history and plans, (2) satisfactions and frustrations in early childhood, and (3) beliefs about men entering the field. Findings indicated similarities and differences between male and female teachers. Men and women both expressed a liking for children, but men reported more complex career plans and more frequent experiences that led to discussion of alternative careers. Men also reported incidents of negative discrimination as a result of their gender, but the content of these incidents obscured their significance. Altogether, results suggested that positive career distractions, more than negative discrimination, account for the scarcity of men in early childhood education. (Author/BJD)

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ABSTRACT:

Career Experiences of Men Who Teach Young Children

Teaching young children remains a heavily female occupation in spite of some educators' encouraging more men to enter it. In order to explore the reasons for this imbalance, then male school teachers of young children were interviewed at length about their teaching history and plans, their satisfactions with the work, and their attitudes about male participation in the field. Responses of the ten men were compared to those from eight women holding comparable jobs. Open-ended, semi-structured questions guided the interviews, which lasted 60-90 minutes, and which were tape recorded and transcribed at appropriate places.

Results suggested both similarities and differences: men and women both expressed liking for children, but men reported more complex career plans, and more frequent experiences that led to discussing alternative careers. Men also reported incidents of negative discrimination on account of their gender, but the content of these incidents make their significance unclear. Altogether the results suggest that positive career distractions, more than negative discrimination, account for the scarcity of men in early childhood education.

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CAREER EXPERIENCES OF MEN WHO TEACH YOUNG CHILDREN

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Since men at many times and places have not been very involved with young children, educators have sometimes advocated compensating for this lack by recruiting more men into early childhood teaching (Robinson, 1981). According to this argument, having both sexes as teachers would give children a more androgynous educational experience: they would (hopefully) witness both sexes form caring, personal relationships with children--at least at school if not elsewhere. Men would contribute to early childhood education by being living examples that contradict the usual stereotypes about being male. They would not contribute, however, by behaving in "manly" ways in the classroom; evidence in any case suggests that they do not, and even cannot because of situational constraints (Lee & Wolinsky, 1973; Seifert, 1975).

Yet men have remained scarce in early childhood education, even in public-school sponsored programs such as kindergarten, where salaries and conditions now match those at all levels of public schooling. Since men often do choose to teach older children and adolescents, why do they continue not choosing the very young? One possible answer is that early childhood teaching lacks status within education and among occupations generally, and therefore discourage many males from entering the field. Men who do value contact with young children would therefore worry not only about achieving competence with them, but also about earning at least a modicum of respect from other professionals and from society. Women entering a male-dominated profession, on the other hand, would "only" need to worry about their competence, since entering men's work would usually increase their public status, not decrease it (Schreiber, 1979). Thus men and women in non-traditional careers may face related, but not identical pressures.

From day to day, of course, men in early childhood education do not experience the status and competence issues in the rather blunt way just described. Much of their attention goes instead to the ongoing demands of their jobs, in which they presumably have as much intrinsic interest as more traditional workers. To some extent, furthermore, the issues of status and competence may exist only in the minds and hearts of male teachers--through prior socialization--rather than in actual interactions with others. Whether perceived or real, however, and whether well articulated or not, these concerns may accompany them in their work, at least during its initial stages.

Exploring Men's Attitudes to Teaching the Young

To learn how much validity these ideas may have, I recently interviewed eighteen teachers of young children at some length. Ten of these were male, and eight were female; all were currently teaching nursery, kindergarten, or Grade 1 in the Winnipeg School Division. The ten men constituted most of the males teaching at these levels in this division. Most of the women came from the same schools as the men; in two cases, however, they were selected from comparable schools because of scheduling problems. No effort was made to find outstanding or unusual females to match with the males.

The men and women had similar amounts of teaching experience (averaging about four years for the men and five years for the women), and of university training (about four years for both sexes). Overall, their education was typical of Winnipeg area teachers, though their classroom experience was a bit less than teachers generally.

I interviewed each teacher for sixty to ninety minutes about three general topics: 1) his or her teaching history and plans; 2) his or her satisfactions and frustrations in early childhood teaching; and 3) his or her beliefs about

men entering early childhood education. The interviews followed a flexible set of questions that often invited open-ended responses. A precisely standardized format proved impossible, partly because the teachers' attitudes were necessarily complex, and partly because the teachers themselves initiated frequent digressions in their comments. All the teachers reported enjoying the interviews, and some capitalized on the opportunity by talking at length on many features of their careers.

Interviews were tape recorded, and I used the recordings to reconstruct answers to the original set of questions. For the most part this procedure meant transcribing essentially verbatim quotations from the tapes, though often the quotations were taken from more than one place within the recording. I then examined the resulting reconstructed questionnaires both for common themes and for variety among individuals; and in particular, for gender-related differences.

What Men Tell About Their Careers With Children

Several themes emerged in the interviews that differentiated between the men and the women. These differences occurred, however, in the context of an important similarity that pervaded all the interviews, whether of male or female teachers. Let me describe these one at a time, beginning with the similarity.

A similarity: liking for children. All teachers, without exception, conveyed or stated a liking for children. They inserted comments to this effect even when not asked, and using various terms: children, they said, are fun, relaxing, spontaneous, and the like. One teacher summed up his feelings by saying, "Children give you more, and young children give you the most." These comments showed no obvious relationship to the gender of the

teacher. This fact may cause no surprise in liberally-minded educators and psychologists. It is worth noting explicitly, though, since it contradicts stereotypes about men who teach young children (Seifert, 1983). The universal liking for children, furthermore, needs remembering in interpreting the gender differences described below.

A difference: enticements to work elsewhere. Eight men reported experiences in which significant others discussed alternative careers or jobs with them. Only one of the nine women reported a similar incident. The potential career changes varied in content by individual, as did the source or person from which the proposals came. Table 1 lists the changes and the sources for the men. The one woman who reported a similar experience had been invited by a school administrator to apply to become an elementary school principal. She began the training program necessary for applying for this job, but left it before completion.

Although one of the men reported a similar invitation (also declined), most men said that their discussions of career alternatives were not clearly identified as "official job recruitment efforts." Instead they occurred as periodic informal conversations with friends or relatives in other occupations or in other fields of education. At no time in these conversations, according to the male teachers, did anyone criticize the men for teaching young children, nor express dislike or contempt for early childhood education in general. Instead the conversations simply emphasized the positive attractions of other sorts of work, and they seemed to assume that the men would in fact want to consider such alternatives. Evidently the male teachers were presented with such career alternatives more than were the females. As I discuss below, though, they may also have invited knowledge of alternatives.

A difference: discrimination incidents. Five of the ten men reported events or situations that they considered discrimination on the basis of gender. Unlike the positive distractions described above, these events closed down operations for the men, rather than expand them. One man, for example, reported that a former principal of his had refused to let him teach nursery in the school, although the principal had been willing to let him teach Grade 2. Three reported taking excessive time (2-3 years) to fit into the social life of the school, and one of these was still not sure that he "belonged" after three years working with the same staff. Two male teachers described serious conflicts with their own parents about the wisdom of choosing early childhood education as a career.

Comparable negative events were described by one of the women. In her case she reported conflict with her parents about the wisdom of taking university training in early childhood education, instead of "getting married right away like a good girl," as she put it. By the time she entered the teaching force, however, this conflict had mellowed considerably, suggesting that the conflict really centered more on whether she should have worked at all, rather than on the content of her work, as was true for the men.

Since some of these problems resemble ones reported by teachers generally (Lortie, 1975), they are less clearly evidenced for gender effects than the positive-distraction finding already described. It is impossible, besides, to decide how much these men and women experienced gender discrimination in some objective sense, and how much they simply felt that they did. Significantly, though, the men all attributed their problems to gender discrimination, rather than to what might be called the "occupational hazards" of teaching in general.

A difference: complexity of career plans. The men were noticeably more ambitious than the women in their future career plans. The question "What do you expect to be doing ten years from now?", for example, produced dramatic gender differences. All ten men described future activities out of the classroom, but which mostly involved or related to young children somehow; their ideas are summarized in Table 2. None of the eight women described plans in any way comparable in complexity. Instead their vision of the future focused on issues of personal or family development: they hoped to travel, or to partially retire, or (for one of them) to raise children, or to simply continue teaching the young. As one woman put it, "My commitment to early childhood education obliges me to give priority to my own family"--even to the point of interrupting her career. No man expressed personal commitments this strong, although four included travel and partial retirement among their hopes for the future--paradoxically in spite of also having more ambitions involving plans.

In the long run, of course, the men may not reach their complex goals; and in the long run, too, the women may discover complex ambitions in themselves. The teachers I interviewed were mostly young enough to revise their career and personal plans in various ways. If so, then these men and women may look more similar to each other at the ends of their careers than they do right now (Gilligan, 1982). Nevertheless, at the time of these interviews, the men clearly placed their teaching in a larger context of careers and vocational activity than did the women.

The "Typical" Man and His Prospects With Children

Taken together, these findings suggest the following portrait of the male teacher in early childhood education:

1) He likes children as much as any teacher of young children;

2) He likes children enough, in fact, to ignore the distractions of other careers;

3) He may sometimes experience discrimination against males in this field, but not necessarily;

4) He sees relationships between his teaching young children and other related work;

5) He expects to act on these insights eventually.

A sixth point should probably also be added: that like everyone else, males who teach young children differ among themselves in many important ways. In spite of their individual differences, though, they share as a group something unusual among men: namely a career interest in teaching and nurturing young children. Judging by my interviews, they express this interest in a way that is "typically male": they have more elaborate work goals.

These results, of course, have only as much validity as the interview method they are based on. To some extent they may suffer from the problems of self-reports: the selective memory of the teachers, and their human desire to present themselves in a positive light (some call this "face saving validity"). It is socially desirable, for example, for teachers to say that they enjoy children, whether or not they always do; likewise, it is desirable for men to show interest in their careers. The responses in my study may reflect knowledge of these expectations to some extent, mixed with genuinely held attitudes. Further research using diverse methods (e.g. direct classroom observation, or experimental designs) can help clarify the relative influence of social desirability in this study.

Assuming that the findings do prove stable and valid, they suggest certain reasons why men may remain scarce in early childhood education. In particular they suggest that positive career distractions may minimize male involvement more than does negative discrimination. Men, in a sense, may not be "pushed" out to the field so much as "pulled" into others. Even though they have not yet responded to it, the men in this study face a comparative abundance of information about alternatives to classroom teaching of young children. This fact may amount to an indirect--yet socially acceptable--form of social pressure on the men. Although they have not yielded to the pressure yet, the men's career plans suggest that they may do so eventually.

Achieving a better gender balance in early childhood education, then, will require larger numbers of men coping with and ignoring such distractions, at least for a good part of their careers. Can larger numbers of men in fact do so? The answer waits upon further research--perhaps of cross-cultural early childhood services --and of career development projects intended to develop male interest in this field (e.g. McCandless, 1974; or Veres, 1982). The current gender imbalance in early childhood education suggests that under present cultural conditions, most men respond to career distractions rather quickly--maybe even before considering early childhood teaching seriously. The distracting process may keep the numbers of men down even though actual discriminatory incidents prove quite rare, and even though more men might succeed with teaching the young if they actually tried it, and even though female early childhood teachers may themselves prefer a better balance of the genders.

Given current conditions, the career ambition or "creativity" of these men may be both a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because any profession

presumably needs ambitious individuals who can start innovative services to serve the public. A curse, though, if the ambitions cause these same individuals to leave direct experience with children sooner than they should. If so, then the male focus on career enhancement may reduce, rather than enhance, men's long-run contributions to the field. In the long run the field itself would also lose by producing certain innovators who do not understand children well enough. In a sex-typed society, however, a sex-typed occupation may not be able to escape these dangers.

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Table 1:

Career Changes Suggested To

Male Early Childhood Teachers

	Suggested Changes	Source
1)	Administrator of social service projects for the church	family, church members
2)	camp director	friend who is a director
3)	school principal	school administrator
4)	writing children's books	spouse
5)	teaching high school or upper elementary	parents, school administrator
6)	administrator of special education programs	school administrator, friend who is a teacher
7)	making children's toys from wood	friends
8)	administrator and teacher of own day care center	friends involved in day care movement

Note that #5 was reported by two teachers, and that #2 and #3 were reported by the same teacher.

Table 2:

Career Plans Described By

Male Early Childhood Teachers

Teaching high school or older elementary grades (3 times)

School principal or other administration (3 times)

Elementary school counselor

Early childhood curriculum consultant sponsored by the schools

Independent or free-lance consultant to early childhood teachers

Directing after-school, multi-purpose recreation program

Writing children's books

Independent political advocate for day care in the schools

Day care director

Summer camp director

Investment counseling

(Note that the first two options were reported by three different men, and the others by one each. Note, too, that some of these plans overlap with the "Suggested Changes" reported in Table 1.)